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The Grey Sunbird *Nectarinia veroxii* in southern Malawi

by D. B. Hanmer

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Benson & Benson (1977: 188) suggest that *Nectarinia veroxii* might occur very sparsely in the lower Shire valley in Malawi and draw attention to its occurrence in the lower Zambezi valley (see also Clancey 1971: 109). This has now been confirmed, since on 9 November 1978 at Nchalo, 16° 16′ S, 34° 55′ E, I netted (and after study released) a sunbird unquestionably of this species.

Description: Upperparts, from head to upper tail-coverts, and upper wing-coverts, dark grey (head slightly darker) with pale bluish green metallic sheen. Sides of head lighter grey, shading into pale grey on underparts as a whole (slight tinge of yellowish on lower abdomen and under tail-coverts). Under wing-coverts white. Flash on each side of chest red, with two yellow feathers on each side. Remiges and rectrices brownish grey, with bluish sheen on upper surface. Eye dark brown. Bill fairly well curved, black, with a bright orange swelling on each side at base; feet black.

Measurements and weight: Wing 55, tail 39, culmen from skull 21, tarsus 16 mm. Weight 9·1 g.

The bird was evidently immature, as indicated by the swellings at the base of the bill and the tinge of yellowish on the lower abdomen (Mackworth-Praed & Grant 1963: 505 write of the young bird being washed with yellowish below). Also, it was in heavy body moult, the metallic feathers not fully grown.

It can be safely assumed that the subspecies at Nchalo is *N. v. fischeri*, and that this particular individual, wing 55 mm, was a female (see for example Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1963), White (1963: 81), Clancey (1971: 109)). Again for example, for the nominate form Mackworth-Praed & Grant give wing 62–68 mm in the male, 56–60 mm in the female, as against *fischeri* respectively 61–63, 55–56 mm. The pectoral flashes are usually described as red (as by Clancey 1964: 434). However, Mackworth-Praed & Grant describe them as red and yellow, so that the presence of a little yellow in the Nchalo specimen is not surprising. Furthermore, of 42 specimens of the species as a whole in the British Museum (Natural History), the Bensons (pers. comm.) found

a single wholly yellow feather in each of 19. Also, in about half of the 42, yellow was hidden at the base of the odd red feather.

The bird was caught in dry grassland with leafless scrub, adjoining (within 10 m) a hedge of thicket around my vegetable garden. Two had been seen at the same spot in the previous fortnight. The same bird was recaught on 23 November 1978 in thicket 300 m from the place of first capture and weighed 8·9 g. Body plumage was still in heavy moult with the metallic feathers not fully grown. I have no other record of the species since taking up residence at Nchalo in 1973. Like *Apalis ruddi* (cf. Hanmer 1979), this may be another case of a species driven out of its normal habitat into a housing area through bush clearance.

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A new northern subspecies of the Tropical Gnatcatcher *Polioptila plumbea*

by Kenneth C. Parkes

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The gnatcatchers, genus *Polioptila*, constitute a New World group of uncertain affinities, generally placed as a subfamily of either the Old World warblers (Sylviidae) or the enlarged family Muscicapidae, the "Old World insect eaters," as in the "Peters" check-list. The genus is primarily tropical, with one species (*caerulea*) widespread in the United States and 2 others (*melanura* and *nigriceps*) reaching north only to the southwestern U.S., the latter having been only recently detected breeding in Arizona (Phillips *et al.* 1973). Species limits within the genus are fairly well understood, but there is one group of forms from Mexico and Central America for which the early literature is hopelessly confused and must be disregarded. The history of this confusion was well documented by Phillips (1962) and Phillips *et al.* (1973) and in both of these papers the characters and distribution of the 3 problem species *nigriceps*, *albilora*, and *plumbea* are presented along with keys for their identification.

The most widely distributed species in the genus is the Tropical Gnatcatcher *P. plumbea* with a range extending from southern Mexico to Peru and Brazil. The northernmost populations have been confused especially with